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WILLIAM PICKENS.

NEGRO EVOLUTION.

BY WILLIAM PICKENS.

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Miss Olive E. Npton
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The following address, prepared wholly by William Pickens, a student of Talladega College, Talladega, Alabama, the American Missionary Association College for the Negro in Alabama, is published in response to request made by many who heard Mr. Pickens deliver a part of it, and desired to see the whole in print.

Mr. Pickens is one of five students of the college now on a tour through the North in the interest of the college, under the direction of the undersigned, one of the Faculty.

July 16, 1900.

J. M. P. METCALF,

ELYRIA, OHIO.

TALLADEGA, ALABAMA,

THE AMERICAN MISSIONARY ASSOCIATION

COLLEGE FOR THE NEGRO

IN ALABAMA

NEGRO EVOLUTION.

BY WILLIAM PICKENS.

As the Negro has been the toy of the sportive genealogist and a riddle for the ethnologist, the very phrase "Negro Evolution" brings before our mental eyes a whole phantasmagoria of allusions and illusions. Airy philosophy has made his black skin the brand of Cain or the mark of accursed Ham. One facetious historian of the nineteenth century turned, looked through the infinite vista of time away back to the Creation and saw the Almighty making four individuals: a white pair—Adam and Eve, and a black pair—Adamah and Hevah. And the whites were endued with the spirit of God, while the blacks were left as soulless as the lion! How superior is this man's retrospective vision to that of the writer of Genesis!

Other abusers of ethnology have signed their names to it that the Negro is a highly evolved monkey or a half-brother to the gorilla.

Those of the less intoxicated type ascribe his color and his features to the influence of his environments. This last theory seems all the more plausible from the changes that climate and civilization work in him. It also explains essential differences among the autochthonic races of various latitudes in Africa. All other theories must be attributed to that poetic tendency and creative imagination of the human mind, slightly colored, of course, by foolish pride.

We acknowledge that we know not our origin; but we are endeavoring to discover and to shape our destiny. As the Jew said, "One thing I know, that whereas I was blind, now I see," so say we: "One thing we know, that whereas God so willed, some creative power has given us being."

Whether we began with creation we cannot say; but we can say that when history was born of chaos, among its first companions was a black man. And we wish no remoter evidence than history."

The records of real human life are the most charming of all books. The story of human plans and actions, of human plots and counterplots, and of results always determined by the overruling providence of God, is the most acceptable of stories. The world's history consists of many great conflicts of opinion, many of which seem to have been won by that element whose highest ideals are plainly contrary to our most instinctive feelings of justice and humanity. But the general trend and the certain end of all great issues have proclaimed with an indisputable voice: There is an unchangeable and universal God.

Ever since the decay of Egyptian civilization, and only the Infinite Mind knows how long before, one of the most fruitful quarters of God's sunlit earth has been peopled by a race void of the right conception of a common Father or an eternal life. The only line of demarkation between the man and the brute is, that the soul of the former, in its efforts to express gratitude for its existence, makes its savage sacrifices to the hand-made gods of the wilderness. This soul is the priceless gift of his Creator, and is a hidden metal, having attractions for magnetic Christian influences. It is this beloved jewel that has lured the most devout workers of God's people from home comforts and friends to brave the terrors of the sea, the sickness of the swamp and often the hostility of the very ones whom their hearts long to save.

It was from such a condition of life that Providence caused many thousands to be transported to a land where, in immediate contiguity with civilization, three centuries would develop more Christian character than a millennium of missionary work could effect in their native jungles. The mysterious hand of God is not always discernible to man. The allure-ment of the Dutch slave-trader who landed at Jamestown was so many pieces of gold; the motive of the purchasing farmer was the best possible crops with the least possible exertion of

his own physical powers; the palliation of the church was due to a derogatory desire for transient peace and prosperity: but above and superior to all this human will stood the unseen plan of God—the extension of his kingdom to one of the lowliest of his beloved races of men. When we remember that this slave's mind was allowed to become so broad and no broader; that he was permitted to know so much of God's word and no more; to approach, as it were, so near to God and no nearer, our pessimistic minds are apt to think that the design of man for a time surmounted the divine plan. But when we consider the preponderance of dross that needed to be burned from this metal, the ages of bad influences that needed to be purged out of this savage blood, we are compelled to bow our heads in humble recognition of the great wisdom of God.

The tale of those suffering years has often been told. It has, with mitigations, been stereotyped in "Uncle Tom's Cabin." It still lives on thousands of dusky lips in the South, and is still being whispered into eager-listening ears. My own grandmother, whose gray head and incoherent utterances gave me my first ideas of history, has often quickened the beat of my boyish heart with such tales of woe as I have failed to discover in the history of French Terror or Catholic Inquisition. But she always concluded, as the whole race and all its well-wishers must conclude, that it all assisted in the execution of the faultless plan of God.

We are not always delighted when God manifests his will; neither do we always pray from our hearts that his will, regardless of ours, be done. When the Federal arms were knocking at the gates of a Southern fortification, a certain mistress commanded all her slaves to pray.

One day she inquired, "What do you pray for, Maria?"

"I prays, Missis, dat de Lord's will may be done."

"But you mustn't pray that way! You must pray that our enemies be driven back."

But God's will *must* be done, as the results of that great struggle have shown and are showing.

After the liberty-loving manhood of the North had, with

great sacrifice, welded a nation and emancipated a race, then and there was born into the world the greatest question that ever attracted the attention of American statesmanship, philanthropy and Christianity. As the old colored preacher explained to his congregation, this was "a providential accident;" it liberated four millions from the milder curse of chattel servitude, but left the emancipation from the greater bondage of mind and soul to be wrought as all great things are wrought, gradually and surely.

An old Negro "aunty" said: "Befor' de war de Nigger didn't have nuthin' but hisself, and he wusn't his own Nigger; an' atter de war he was his own Nigger, but dat's all he did own." Yes, he was his "own Nigger." But let us view his pitiful surroundings. He was homeless, so ignorant that the horizon was the boundary of his world; and he knew not the cardinal points of that. The immoral, unreligious bit of religion that he had was only fit to sink him. That instinctive respect for freedom which God writes on every man's heart had been almost, if not wholly, obliterated by ten generations of slavery. His religion consisted of emotions, and came as violently and vanished with as much volatility as do his feelings. He called upon God like Jezebel's prophets called upon Baal,—with all his might and main. He worshipped Him like the Romans worshipped Bacchus,—with demoniacal contortions and shoutings. And to aggravate all this social and religious degradation, he was the defenseless object of malicious eyes; he was to run the gauntlet between his own weaknesses and the ebbing fury of the recent war, and was the destined scapegoat of every national crime. There he stands, a venture for pedagogical skill, a test for the strength of the Christian religion.

But nothing surprises God, who sees into all time. And by another "providential accident" the American Missionary Association had been formed at the North, a society destined to perfect what the national arms initiated. The millions are acquainted with the history of its formation and early work. It was the union of a number of anti-slavery and missionary societies, composed of men who had sufficient faith

in the first chapters of Genesis to believe in the fatherhood of God and brotherhood of man — men who evidently desired to do as Jesus would.

The Christians of the North can point to no field and to no era with more just pride than to their work among these freedmen in the very wake of a cruel war. As the civil arms marched ahead, destroying life and property, the Church Militant, armed with the Word of God and shielded by an unconquerable faith, stepped into the desolation to lift the lowly, *renew* life and prosperity and offer salvation.

The Northern girl-teacher went forth upon the plain where her brother had fallen, and laid the foundation of an institution of learning — an indestructible monument to his heroic death. She braved an ostracism oppressive to the human heart. She was the despised friend of publicans and sinners, — nay worse, of a hated race of ex-slaves. Her warfare required more real courage than that of the cannoneer and rifleman. For hers was not the inspiration of the noise and shifting scene of the battle-field, but the meditative coolness of a tender Christian heart. But every wave of malice vanished, vaporized by her altruistic ardor. And her tear of sorrow for wicked opposition became a tear of joy, when she beheld the many souls being taught the right service of her God, the transforming mass of humanity for which she was the leaven; when she saw the many mothers with their little ones bowed around their knees, teaching them to lisp a prayer for their idolized teacher unto their teacher's God; and lastly, when she remembered her thousand friends at home, waiting to welcome her with cheer and praise.

From such conditions arose such an institution as Talladega College, situate among the hills of Alabama near the edge of the Black Belt, which, however, is named rather from the character of the soil than from the color of the inhabitants. In 1867 a building previously erected as a white school was purchased by the American Missionary Association. One of the slaves who helped lay the foundation has had his hopeless toil requited by having one daughter to graduate and another pursuing the college course.

Through the generosity of the North and the indefatigability of its instructors the institution has grown materially and influentially. And on the hallowed ground where Andrew Jackson's men built their camp-fires while savages lurked in surrounding thickets, now stand fifteen buildings in a healthful atmosphere, and solemn mountains rise on every side like providential sentinels. It is a model and light to black and white; for prior to the establishment of American Missionary Association schools in the South the poor of the whites spurned public schools as "pauper schools." They ranked them in the same category with the poorhouse, while the great slaveholders sent their sons and daughters to private institutions. But such centers as Talladega have exerted such educational influence that public schools are now looked upon with pride.

Talladega is the place wherein the colored ministers gather to fit themselves for their calling. No one could rightly estimate the necessity for this theological department or the good that it is doing, unless he should have the opportunity to visit an old-time colored church and enjoy the vociferous volumes of jargon, called by the inapplicable name of preaching. Then let him walk into a church pastored by one of Talladega's theological students, and he will have new hopes for the highest education of the Negro. It has been well said in support of higher education that the black man cannot succeed with less education than the white man unless he be superior to him. (And "black superiority" would be a very unique and contestable claim indeed!)

No greater law was ever promulgated in the history of the world than the Golden Rule. It is social and political justice stated in a sentence. It is positive, not negative; active, not passive. It upholds aggression, not neutrality. But it is impossible for us to do to others what we would have them do to us unless we consider their condition; unless we in our imagination exchange positions with them. *This* very few people take time to do.

Let us condescend to enter the person of a Southern Negro and grow with him from his birth.

He is ushered into the world as sinless as any human being. Soon he becomes childishly cognizant of the great world about him. He catches a few words and begins to discern the difference between two races. No seed of misanthropy has yet been sown in his bosom, and he is a perfect child of Nature. Ere long he learns to read. He peruses the daily news only to find repeated manifestation of prejudice and crime. What an awful education! How dangerous this little knowledge, unless further guided under the domination of Christian influences!—Now is his critical period. Now he needs sympathy. His energies are radiating from his eyes and emanating from the very tips of his fingers. But he is docile and pliant. He stands like the little fledgling bird on the rim of its nest, ignorant of the hawk's ravin and the fowler's eye, and peers longingly into the great world about him. He is ambitious to learn, but he must meet one hundred who will declare his incapacity before he finds one who will offer a tolerable opportunity. Is there not hope where the majority from such circumstances will work three months for books and clothes and the remaining nine for board while attending school?

There are thousands today, struggling in the midst of circumstances altogether unimaginable to one not thoroughly acquainted with this portion of the South's population.

It is just here that the incalculable service of the American Missionary Association is seen in reducing this per cent. of national ignorance, and in transforming soil that is otherwise only fruitful of crime. No society was ever more patriotic in its principles and endeavors. There is no limit to the characteristic gratitude of these black beneficiaries; and among them the word Northland is synonymous with freedom and justice, and Yankee means philanthropy and law. The many "Weary Willies" that journey through the Southland (and they always go afoot in spite of both "jim-crow" and palace cars) find it convenient to take advantage of the Negro's gratefulness to the North by introducing themselves as "Yankees" whenever they appeal to the hospitality of his kitchen. I never heard it fail. And it is some sort of compliment to

Northern integrity to assert that all the white tramps I ever saw in my life were, by confession, Yankees. Of course, some of these impostor-Yankees have never been North of the Missouri Compromise Line.

There is a large element, principally Southern, that favors the limiting of the Negro's education to manual training. No assigned reason is satisfactory. The least noteworthy position is held by those who trumpet his intellectual incapacity. But to these the American Missionary Association schools of the South are offering that conclusive argument which Philip presented to Nathaniel, — "Come and see." Others claim that it is the surest way for him to rise in the world; but every page of history and every moment of unbiased thought argue against the likelihood of attaining any material eminence, unattended by intellectual development. Moreover, it is limiting that which God created limitless — the human mind. It is bounding that which God intends to be boundless — the evolutions of that mind. It is a thoughtless attempt of man to defer the coming of the kingdom of God by saying how near a race shall approach to the requisite intellectual and moral completeness. There are others — happily a few — who claim to know by a strange omniscience of their own invention that God created the black man merely for toil and sweat. But to make this assertion tenable some long-cherished teachings of the Bible must first be obliterated. Amos must be branded a deceiver when he reports God as saying, "Are ye not as children of the Ethiopians unto me, O children of Israel?" And with all respect for the promoters of this infant republic, I say that some of their most highly applauded utterances must be relegated to poetry and utopianism; that "all men are born free and equal" becomes a national lie. Not all who claim that the Almighty condescended to create an inferior and degenerate race that should infect and deteriorate the world, — not all such are willing to give you the key to their position by acknowledging, like the Texan Bland, that they are the extreme haters of the black race. One virtue for Bland! — frankness. There are others who make the groundless assertion that to educate

the black man is to create peril for the white man. That is the same as to say that to *tame a tiger* or to *train a horse* is to make the one *more ravenous* and the other *more unruly*. Education beautifies one man's character and degrades that of another. That is the same as to say that the combination of two atoms of hydrogen and one of oxygen *here* forms a molecule of pure water; but the combination of the same elements in the same proportion *there* will create a molecule of pure salt. But as such a statement is in full defiance of natural forces, so the assertion that education in the black man's mind has opposite tendencies to that in any man's mind, is in full defiance of intellectual and spiritual forces.

As God does nothing without purpose, he has not brought forth a race in vain. This is the kindly decision of those who have spent their lives in the South, teaching the sable Topsies that were growing up side by side with the cotton and corn. No artistic brush has given to the world a more lifelike picture than Mrs. H. B. Stowe's pen portraiture of that little New Orleans slave urchin Topsy. We see the tatterdemalion, rolling its large eyes black at the center and bordered by white adamant. The bared teeth glisten like calcareous stalactites and stalagmites in the Wyandotte Cave. The body is half bedecked by a time-worn, weather-beaten bundle of rags. The feet, which look like a new genus of crustaceans, have never been insulted by such a thing as a shoe. The little horn-like kinks stand selfishly one by one, and no three in the same direct line. The protruding nails, unpared, give it the likeness of a carnivorous creature. Add to this an elfish, satyric countenance and you have a real wingless harpy,—a form that transcends Vergil's Furies guarding the gates of Hades. The wonderful imagination of the ancients failed to surmise such a shape for mythology.

This is a sample (not an average, however) of what the home missionary has had to deal with, not with angels. Mrs. Harriet Beecher Stowe, being the desirable woman that she was and having the infinite faith in both God and man that she had, narrates her fictitious Topsy as being educated out of depravity, reared a great missionary and sent like an

ethereal comet, enlightening her dark ancestral Africa. But now the story needs not be told in fiction; for today many thousand Topsyies in the South are being educated and elevated by the irresistible power of Christianity and are going forth to reach and preach to hearts to others inaccessible.

Thus while the politicians are almost mad in their imperious demand for an eruptive change, the real Christian people of the land are working out a change which, though not volcanic, will be lasting. That island which is built by the corals is just as durable as that one which is formed by volcanic action; and the creating of the first is not attended by a great tremor and destruction of life. The excavating of the Suez Canal required more time and cost man more toil than the belching forth of the billions of tons of lava from the hoarse throat of Vesuvius; *but* the removal of the dirt from the Suez did not cost the world a Pompeii.

When we accept the arguments of natural phenomena we accept the teachings of God; we are getting sermons from stones and books from the running brooks.

Let us turn again to Talladega College as an example of the onward march, not of the Negro, but of the South.

One who has not had the misfortune to witness what we Southern people term a lynching is somewhat unprepared to appreciate the full value of one influence exerted by this institution upon its vicinity. A lynching is a nondescript exhibition of outraged and enraged civilization. It happens when justice flees to brutish beasts and men lose their reason; when malignity pervades the air, and permeates the soil, and acts as an extinguisher for the good and a combustible for the bad; when man, seized by a frenzy, seems to be possessed of seventy times seven demons, and a cry of agony has the same effect upon his ear that a sweet strain of music has upon the ordinary ear; when angels weep and devils rejoice, God is forgotten and human blood is cheaper than stagnant water. Such a monster is a lynching! Such a thing have the waves of civilization that flow from Talladega College succeeded in washing completely out of a large arena.

A few months ago a white and a black man were both controlled by the demon of strong drink. The result was a veriest murder, the white man's head being almost severed and ghastly incisions made in his side. The criminal, together with several suspects, was arrested and incarcerated. And the remainder of the program in most other places would have been the mustering of a good army of from one to three thousand and the promiscuous shooting of the whole number, guilty and guiltless. Not so in Talladega, but the treasurer of our institution was made foreman of a jury, fair trial secured, the criminal condemned to die and his innocent fellow-prisoners released—law defended.

We will rightly value that fact by becoming for a moment one of those innocent ones, locked up with a criminal around whose neck the lyncher's noose is, as a matter of course, to be thrown. And believed to be an accomplice! That is no mirthful predicament for one acquainted with the impetuosity of Southern blood. Never were the people more convinced of the shame of mob-violence and the efficacy of inviolate law than when the criminal was condemned and his innocent fellow-prisoners, whom the fury of an irrational mob would have hurled into eternity, were given their rightful liberty. Nay more, the white minister whom our Y. M. C. A. invited to address us on the Sunday following the execution took the last words of the criminal for a text. Is that not turning evil to good account? What a contrast with the action of the Georgia mob,—defying law and discarding justice,—burning their victim with the inspiration of Nero,—extracting his bones and breaking his fingers for trophies,—and then dancing to the music of his groans with such a fiendish glee as the Apache Indian was never guilty of. Look on *that* picture, then on *this*. Which pleases God and betters mankind?

We are not dull in our appreciation of this and other institutions established and supported by Northern philanthropy. Gratitude is not the word. If permitted by grammar and rhetoric we would coin a word with one hundred times the meaning of the word *gratitude*. "One disposed to

doubt our thanks I would admonish to travel incognito through the South; or to accept the unspoken testimony of those who have labored several decades among us, continuously, contentedly. I do not mean that Christianity has relegated its service to be bought for thanks. But there is an element in human nature that is only moved by gratitude. It obeys this as steel obeys magnetism, as matter obeys gravitation. If someone inquire after our gratefulness, tell him that long as a Negro girl's tongue rattles in her head; long as a black boy's heart pants in his breast and sends his dark red blood coursing through his veins; long as his soul may chant the slave dirge and free pæan of his ancestors; while the stars and stripes mean life to him; long as his retentive memory has a place for sweet reminiscence and means of communication; *so long* shall kindnesses to him be remembered — *so long* shall his gratitude be unspared.

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